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AUTHOR Adams, Phylliss J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and discusses the variables that influence the success of an individualized reading program: the personnel, pupils, and materials. Variables related to personnel include the teacher's attitudes, beliefs, competencies, and skills concerning individualized instruction. Although research has not yet clarified what type of child is best suited for an individualized approach, pupil variables to take into consideration include: self concept, learning style, attitude toward reading, and degree of independence in directing his own learning. Essential materials needed for the classroom and the school to provide for varied learning styles include: a large supply of books, a great variety of skill development material, and an abundance of materials for creative reading related activities. (TB)

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INDIVIDUALIZED READING: VARIABLES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of reading in the elementary schools is today, as in the years past, a major challenge. There are many approaches to the task but no panaceas. One such approach is the Individualized Reading Approach. Several of the basic ideas of this approach date back many years in time; however, the organized movement for individualized reading can be identified as beginning in the early fifties. (1)

The individualized reading program developed in the fifties, sixties, and continuing today is characterized by several distinctive features. These include: 1) Student self-selection of reading material; 2) Use of individual library titles, paperbacks, magazines -- all kinds of reading material -- for instructional purposes; 3) Individual pupil-teacher conferences; 4) Flexible grouping for skill development and other task-oriented purposes; and (5) incorporation of creative related language arts experiences as a part of the reading program.

These features may be quite familiar to numerous segments of today's reading teachers; however, reiteration seems appropriate since there are currently many programs and materials designed to promote individualized instruction which can not be equated with the individualized reading approach.

RESEARCH STUDIES

Research studies devoted to the individualized reading approach have been extensive, especially during the sixties. Reports and listings of these studies have been summarized in several publications and include comparisons of pupil

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achievement under individualized reading programs with the achievement of those under ability-grouped programs, descriptions of procedures such as sharing activities, record-keeping, and individual conferences; and reviews of the literature pertaining to individualized reading (2, 3, 10, 11, 12). Although findings from these several hundred studies vary, the comparative studies usually report no significant differences in achievement between the groups -- those engaged in individualized reading and those who were taught in ability groupings. Results of these studies also lead to the conclusion that the success of individualized reading is influenced by numerous variables. The purpose of this paper is to identify and briefly discuss several key variables.

VARIABLES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Which variables influence the success of individualized reading programs? Selected for discussion in this paper are variables related to personnel, pupils, and materials.

Variables Related to Personnel

In any reading program, as demonstrated in the extensive Cooperative Research Studies in Reading conducted in the past years, a key variable in the learning situation is the teacher. (8) Certainly in respect to individualized reading programs, this may be even more true than in other approaches. What variables related to the teacher make a difference?

1. Attitudes, Beliefs, and Philosophy. Is the teacher strongly committed to the basic philosophy upon which the individualized reading approach is based? Specifically, the teacher must examine and evaluate his own beliefs concerning the learner and reading. Those teachers who are to achieve greatest success believe that each student is an individual who learns in his own way, at his own pace, and in respect to his own purposes, needs, and interests. They

exhibit confidence in each student and expectations of success and achievement are projected. They believe that students should be given the opportunity to assume responsibility for their own learnings and that they must assist children to be on their own in reading as soon as possible.

In respect to reading, the teacher must analyze his own attitudes toward reading. Does he read? Does he enjoy reading? Does he project this feeling of "love of books" by sharing his reading and his enthusiasm for reading with students? A recent study reported in Concern: AACTE Newsletter for Teacher Educators indicates that many teachers do not read much and do not like to read for enjoyment. (7)

Does he provide time for reading in the classroom program, or is reading reserved for "when pupils complete all their work"? The activity of Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) as referred to by Hunt (4) is one growing in popularity in many classrooms and extremely important if we are to develop readers. Teachers must be convinced that this activity is worthwhile -- and that they should engage in reading with their pupils.

How does the teacher perceive reading? How does he answer the question "What is reading?" Highly successful teachers of individualized reading view reading as more than a skill development program. Although skills are important, stimulating interest in and love of reading is a paramount goal of an individualized reading program. Teachers who do not totally accept this goal will no doubt be less effective in an individualized program.

2. Competencies and Skills. Does the teacher possess the competencies and skills needed to implement the program successfully? These competencies include the following:

a) The teacher should have a thorough grasp of the total reading process, including methods and materials. There is considerable evidence to

support the conclusion that teachers are inadequately trained -- if trained at all -- for the teaching of reading. In one recent survey of 850 colleges and universities, it was reported that only 94 institutions required teacher candidates to complete more than 3 semester hours in the teaching of reading. In contrast, more than 3 semester hours were required in several courses, including physical education, geography, and religion. It was concluded that training in reading was badly neglected; and that requiring more hours in religion might be justified for the teacher who is expected to teach reading without adequate preparation, for he had better know how to pray. (6)

b) The teacher should receive specific training in implementing the individualized reading approach. Teachers surveyed by Rothrock indicated that a serious handicap to their use of the individualized reading approach was their lack of training; others who had not used individualized reading stated as a major reason for never using it their lack of instruction in the approach. (9) This training should include development of competencies in questioning techniques, especially in the individual conference setting; listening to students and using this feedback to plan next steps in the instructional program; diagnosing a pupil's particular reading strengths and weaknesses and communicating with the student concerning these areas; assessing learning style and characteristics of pupils; and selecting materials and methods appropriate for particular children.

c) The teacher should have a thorough knowledge of the range of reading skills and methods for teaching these skills. Several studies suggest that few teachers possess this knowledge. (10, 11, 12)

Fortunately, there are several commercially prepared materials, such as the Wisconsin Design for Reading Skill Development (developed at the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning) and the Fountain Valley Teacher Support System (distributed through Zweig Associates) which identify reading skills in behavioral terms and provide assistance to the teacher in diagnosing each child's skill status. If such "skill systems" in reading are used judiciously and flexibly, they may have great potential for use in individualized reading programs.

d) The teacher should be familiar with children's books of literary merit. Although it is totally impossible for the teacher to know all the books thoroughly, it is important that he know as many as possible. This knowing does not mean that he be able to recall each specific detail; it does mean that he know something about the general content in order that he may guide pupils in discussion in individual conferences.

e) The teacher should possess a clear understanding of management techniques, including means of organizing the classroom environment to promote independent pupil thinking and free students to learn on their own as well as ways of utilizing paraprofessionals effectively. Teachers must gain competence in planning with students in addition to planning for students. The teacher must fully utilize the potential help available from paraprofessionals -- paid aides, volunteer parents, and students of all ages: college, high school, and elementary.

In addition to the teacher, other personnel in the school setting influence the success of the individualized reading approach. These include supportive personnel such as librarians, media specialists, special reading teachers, and learning disability specialists. Do they support and encourage the teachers engaged in individualized reading attempts?

Do they communicate ideas freely and assist in implementation? Administrative support and understanding are also essential factors if teachers are to achieve high degrees of success. Does the administration encourage the program? Is adequate financial support forthcoming? Is encouragement in the form of personal interest evidenced?

Variables Related to Pupils

After reviewing research on individualized reading, Sartain concluded that an individualized reading approach may be appropriate for some children, but not for others. (11) A second writer (5) indicated that the approach could be used successfully with suburban as well as inner-city children. Research studies have been reported in which students at all grade levels, including first grade, have made satisfactory progress, and thus, conclusions have been drawn that the program can be successful at every grade level. Since an individualized reading program is based upon the principle that each child is helped to be on his own in reading in such a way that he can become a skillful and interested independent reader, it might be assumed that learners with differing characteristics could be accommodated within an individualized program. However, clear-cut evidence on this issue is not available at this date. On the basis of personal observation and discussion with teachers who are carrying out an individualized program, it appears that the following pupil variables make differences:

a) What is the learning style of the pupil?

b) What positive and/or negative attitudes toward reading has the pupil developed?

c) At what stage of development is the pupil in independently directing his own learning?

d) Does the pupil have a healthy self-concept?

It is strongly recommended that these variables be kept in mind and appropriate strategies planned to provide for individual needs.

Variables Related to Materials

The classroom and the school should be supplied with sufficient materials to provide for varied learning styles, a range of individual interests, and a wide span of achievement levels.

1. Is a large supply of printed material available? Individual titles of literary merit appealing to the students in respect to subject as well as suitable in reading level are vital. Easy-to-read and high-interest-low-vocabulary supplementary reading books are useful. A large collection of paperbacks, magazines, informational books -- in fact, all kinds of reading material -- is needed to implement the program successfully. It has frequently been suggested in the literature that schools aim at a minimum of ten books per child. However, more significant than the number is the criterion that there be books that each child wishes to read and books that he can read.

Commercial collections of library books and/or paperbacks are especially useful for the teacher who is undertaking an individualized program for the first time. An example of such material is Individualized Reading from Scholastic, published by Scholastic Book Services. Included are paperback books, activity cards, skill sheets, and record forms. Although such collections are not sufficient in quantity for a total individualized program, they are useful when combined with other materials.

2. Is a variety of skill development material, both commercial and teacher-prepared, available and organized in usable manner? Are differing methodologies for teaching skills included in the materials? These materials include such items as games, worksheets, tapes, records, filmstrips, and transparencies.

When these materials are readily available and organized for use, pupil individual needs can be provided for efficiently and effectively.

3. Are materials for creative reading related-activities provided? As part of the reading program, expendable materials for pupil use are necessary. Art materials such as construction paper, paints, clay, cloth, flannel, etc., permit pupils to develop creative ways of sharing books.

It is not to be assumed that tremendous quantities of materials alone will assure success of the individualized reading program. Materials only serve rather than dominate. Coupled with the accessibility of materials is the competence of the teacher in diagnosing the pupils' strengths and weaknesses and guiding each student to the materials which will enhance his reading growth and development.

CONCLUSION

Many variables influence the success achieved in individualized reading programs. Although the individualized reading approach has been proven successful, variables related to personnel, pupils, and materials do make a difference! It has been the intent of this paper to describe some of these variables for those who are currently implementing or considering implementation of the individualized reading approach.

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